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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANJUL 000731

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DAKAR PLS PASS ODC, RAO, AND DAO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/04/2016  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KMCA](#) [GA](#)  
SUBJECT: THE GAMBIA: NATIONAL ASSEMBLY SPEAKER'S COMMITMENT  
TO REFORM

REF: A. BANJUL 717

[1](#)B. BANJUL 653

[1](#)C. BANJUL 444

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOSEPH STAFFORD, REASON 1.4 (B AND D)

#### SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) In meeting with Ambassador, National Assembly Speaker Bidwell indicated that she plans to convey to President Jammeh her concern over the negative human rights trend here; she cited the ordeal of former parliamentarian Duta Kamaso as illustrative of that trend. Bidwell stressed her determination to promote a more assertive National Assembly vis-a-vis the executive branch and mentioned upcoming special hearings on the GOTG's budget. Bidwell is a relatively independent-minded member of The Gambia's mainstream political establishment; it remains to be seen whether Jammeh will renew her appointment to the Assembly following the January contest for elected members. END SUMMARY.

#### HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION

[1](#)2. (C) In recent meeting with Ambassador, National Assembly Speaker Belinda Bidwell agreed that The Gambia's human rights situation was troubling, acknowledging that the negative trend evident in past months was continuing. She expressed particular concern over the GOTG's silence amidst ongoing criticism by the international human rights community over the restrictive human rights and political environment. Bidwell said she would request a meeting for National Assembly leaders with President Yahya Jammeh following the December legislative session and would take the occasion to register her human rights concerns. Ambassador applauded her initiative and urged her to underscore to Jammeh the damage caused his standing at home and abroad by the negative human rights trend. Noting the GOTG's previous nixing of dialog with us on pursuit of reinstatement of MCA eligibility (ref a), Ambassador also asked that she urge Jammeh to engage with us constructively on this issue, given the MCA program's potential importance in promoting The Gambia's development. Bidwell took Ambassador's presentation on board.

#### CASE OF DUTA KAMASO

[1](#)3. (C) Bidwell cited the case of former National Assembly member with the ruling APRC party, Duta Kamaso, as indicative of the deterioration in the human rights arena. (NOTE: As

previously reported -- e.g., ref b -- authorities detained Kamaso during June/October; she was released without charge but nonetheless stripped of her APRC membership and National Assembly seat. END NOTE) Bidwell dismissed speculation that Kamaso had been guilty of anti-GOTG activities (e.g., support for the failed coup plot in March, links to a pro-opposition on-line "journal"), saying she (Bidwell) was not aware of any such activities by Kamaso. Portraying Kamaso as a reform-minded activist -- but loyal to the APRC and Jammeh -- the Speaker confided that she thought Kamaso had been the victim of a feud between her extended family and another. Elaborating, Bidwell surmised that the opposing family, in an effort to score points against Kamaso's clan, had simply gone to the authorities with false accusations of dissident activity by Kamaso. (COMMENT: We find such a scenario plausible; following the failed coup plot, the GOTG doubtless relied on informers in ferreting out suspects, and Kamaso may well have fallen victim to one without actual evidence against her but seeking to settle a score with her family. END COMMENT)

#### PROMOTING A MORE ASSERTIVE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

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14. (C) As in previous meetings (ref c), Bidwell stressed her determination to promote a more assertive National Assembly that was conscious of its prerogatives vis-a-vis the executive branch and better equipped to serve as a check on the latter. She acknowledged that the Assembly's transformation was a long-term objective that would require the requisite commitment and expertise by parliamentarians; as a step in this direction, Bidwell said she was arranging for special hearings on the GOTG's budget during the December legislative session in an effort to assert greater budget oversight by the Assembly. (NOTE: Emboffs plan to attend these hearings. END NOTE)

COMMENT

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15. (C) Bidwell is a relatively independent-minded member of The Gambia's mainstream political establishment. She is among the appointed (by Jammeh) members of the Assembly and is not a member of the APRC, although she makes clear that she has little sympathy for the opposition parties, portraying them (with some justification) as too weak and fragmented to serve as a genuine alternative to Jammeh and his APRC government. It remains to be seen how much headway she will be able to make with the volatile and autocratic Jammeh on the human rights dossier, if the parliamentarians' meeting with him actually occurs. It also remains to be seen whether Jammeh will appoint her again to the Assembly following its January elections. She has indicated a desire to serve another term, but is aware of rumors that Jammeh views her as too independent-minded and may well not renew her appointment. END COMMENT

STAFFORD